

Leader of separatist Abkhazia dies

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On May 29, at a hospital in Moscow, the President of separatist Abkhazia Sergei Bagapsh died. His duties were assumed by Vice-President Alyksandr Ankvab, who should announce new elections during the next three months. It should be expected that during the election campaign the Abkhaz ruling class and the general public will become polarised, and that two camps will end up clashing: the 'independence' group (who favour more balanced relationship between Abkhazia and Russia) and a 'Moscow party' (who favour even deeper integration with Russia than now). This may lead to a destabilisation of the situation in the unrecognised republic, which would in turn increase regional tensions.

The result of the elections will be important both for the internal situation in Abkhazia and for the relationship between Sukhumi and Tbilisi, Russian-Georgian relations and Russia's position in the region. The success of an 'independence' candidate would allow Abkhazia to maintain a certain degree of autonomy with regard to Russia, while retaining hope of maintaining its contacts with Georgia. A winner for the other camp would downgrade Abkhazia to the level of South Ossetia, which is *de facto* administered by Russia. In practice, this would make perspective of normalising relations between Moscow and Tbilisi in the future even more distant.

It is expected that Russia will actively involve itself in the campaign, and indicate its favoured candidate. For Moscow, the upcoming elections are an opportunity to make Abkhazia even more dependent on it, which is especially relevant in the context of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 (originally the elections were to have been held after the Olympics).

The rule of Sergei Bagapsh

Abkhazia is formally an autonomous republic in Georgia, but it won *de facto* independence for itself as a result of the civil war of 1992-3 (during which it sought the support of Russia). In 2008, after the Russian-Georgian war, Russia, followed by Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Vanuatu recognised Abkhazia's independence (the first four states have also done the same for South Ossetia).

Sergei Bagapsh had ruled Abkhazia for six years. In the elections of 2004 he defeated Raul Khajimba, the then Prime Minister and a former KGB officer, who had been supported by the Kremlin. Khajimba questioned Bagapsh's victory, and brought his followers into the streets in an attempt to take office by force. A re-run of the elections was the compromise, as a result of which Bagapsh became president and Khajimba received the post of Vice-President (as in the USA, candidates run for office in pairs). In the next elections in 2009,

Bagapsh again defeated Khajimba, and this time Alyksandr Ankva became Vice-President; he was a previous Prime Minister of Abkhazia, and also an official of the internal military forces of the Georgian SSR. Khajimba then went into opposition.

Sergei Bagapsh was acceptable both to Moscow and a majority of the Abkhaz people (including the 'independence' camp), although he faced criticism from various parties. His loyalty to Moscow and his consideration of Russian interests in Abkhazia (including the presence of the military, the expansion of Russian business, the seizure of property, etc.) led to allegations that national assets were being sold off; in turn, his avoidance of appropriately servile statements and behaviour towards Moscow gave rise to accusations (by Khajimba, among others) that he was anti-Russian. Bagapsh was supported by economic circles especially; he also enjoyed the stable support of around half of the electorate (who have been unresponsive to radical attitudes).

Potential candidates

It seems that the current campaign will see three candidates putting themselves forwards: Sergei Shamba (the current Prime Minister, and Abkhazia's long-standing minister of foreign affairs), Raul Khajimba and Alexander Ankva. All of them are pro-Russian, but during the course of the election campaign, the differences between them are likely to be emphasised and strengthened. Shamba, a veteran of the peace talks with Georgia, may aim to win over the 'independence' electorate (which does not rule out the necessity of an alliance with Russia, but calls for Abkhazia's autonomy, and a relationship with Russia based on the principle of partnership). It should be assumed that Khajimba would represent the option of conclusion of Abkhazia's *de facto* incorporation into Russia's legal, defence and economic spheres. In this situation, the compromise candidate could be Ankva, who (should he run) will probably present himself as the continuer of the 'Bagapsh line'. It is possible that the electoral contest will see fierce rivalry, which could threaten to destabilise the republic (traditions of direct democracy are strong in Abkhazia, and include meetings among the male populations of individual areas).

The internal Georgian background

In the opinion of Georgia – which is shared by the vast majority of countries – Abkhazia is one of its parts, and so no elections organised by the separatist authorities are recognised. Tbilisi believes that, given Abkhazia's *de facto* occupation by Russia (which is manifested *inter alia* by the stationing of Russian troops on Abkhazian territory), who the leader of the republic is has no great importance. Nevertheless, success for a politician of the 'independence camp' would be the more convenient option for Georgia, because it would offer at least the minimal hope that Abkhazian-Georgian dialogue would continue. Tbilisi will not make any gesture of support towards such a candidate, because that would automatically ruin his chances; but we cannot rule out unofficial Georgian attempts to mobilise the electorate (ethnic Georgians inhabit the Gali region in the east of the republic, and may make up more than a quarter of Abkhazia's total population – and therefore, of its voters). Success for a politician representing the 'Moscow party' would write off such

calculations, and push the prospect of future Georgian-Russian agreement into the distance. However, a possible destabilisation of the situation in Abkhazia could contribute to the escalation of the conflict between Tbilisi and Moscow.

The Russian context

Russia now has much stronger instruments for influencing the situation in Abkhazia than it did in 2004 or even 2009. These include its military presence (a Russian military base, border guards), economic pressure (Russia manages entire sectors of the Abkhazian economy, including the rail network) and making the Abkhazian budget dependent on Russian subsidies. In this situation, the only fully satisfactory victor for Russia would be someone like Raul Khajimba, who would ensure total loyalty and the acceptance of all Russia's interests in Abkhazia. This is important especially in light of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 (the Olympic sites are in the immediate vicinity of the Abkhazian border). The next President of Abkhazia will also be expected to cede a disputed area of 160 km² near the Psou border river to Russia. These lands would probably serve as Olympic facilities (using the territory of a neighbouring state for the games without its consent would violate the Olympic Charter).

We should keep in mind that overly aggressive attempts by Moscow to push its candidate (as happened in 2004) may lead to an increase in his competitors' popularity, the use of the slogan of 'independence', and even the possible appearance of hitherto sporadic anti-Russian sentiments – although Russia's dominance of Abkhazia is too great to imagine any success for a politician who had no support whatsoever from Moscow.

The autumn presidential elections planned in the other separatist republic, South Ossetia, may have an impact on the campaign in Abkhazia. It is expected that in both cases, Moscow will try to emphasise the risk of 'aggression' from Georgia, from which only Russian intervention can protect them. Placing politicians in Sukhumi and Tskhinval who are totally loyal to Russia will not only perpetuate Russian dominance in these para-states and strengthen Moscow's position in the region, but it will also distance the prospect of these breakaway republics reintegrating with Georgia.